

POPULAR FICTION SERIES

Series editors:

Tony Bennett
Professor
School of Humanities
Griffith University

Graham Martin
Professor of English Literature
Open University

In the same series

Cover Stories:

Narrative and ideology in the British spy thriller
by Michael Denning

Lost Narratives:

Popular fictions, politics and recent history
by Roger Bromley

Popular Film and Television Comedy
by Steve Neale and Frank Krutnik

Popular Fiction:

Technology, ideology, production, reading
Edited by Tony Bennett

The Historic Romance 1890–1990
by Helen Hughes

Reading the Vampire
by Ken Gelder

**Reading by Starlight:
Postmodern science fiction**
by Damien Broderick

THE MONSTROUS-FEMININE

Film, feminism, psychoanalysis

Barbara Creed



London and New York

is between these two opposing domains – the worlds of the mother and the father.

In most vampire films, particularly those featuring Dracula, the archaic mother is there only as a shadowy presence. Roger Dadoun argues that those 'elements' which relate to the presence of the mother include the dark, enveloping uterine space of the crypt, creaking sounds, hidden doors, cobwebs and dust (Dadoun, 1989, 52–3). In the conventional scenario, Dracula, with his erect body and penetrating look, becomes 'the phallus-fetish' of the omnipresent mother (ibid., 55). In *The Hunger* where the chief vampire is female we are brought face to face with the archaic mother; there is no need to infer her shadowy presence through the intermediary and fetishized figure of the male vampire. The vampire is the archaic mother. Furthermore, if the male vampire is a fetish figure of the mother, it seems clear that he does not represent the imaginary phallus of the mother, as Dadoun argues, but rather her terrifying, imaginary *vagina dentata*. This image is presented very clearly when the vampire is female; in these texts one of the most frequent images is that of woman's open mouth, sharp pointed teeth and blood-covered lips. As we have seen, *The Hunger* represents the figure of the archaic mother in two forms – as a beautiful, ageless woman and as an ancient, crumbling figure whose ubiquitous presence is attested to by the final shot of her coffin where she lies for ever as one of the undead. A new vampire/mother has taken her place; the line cannot be broken. In the final sequence we see her mothering her new family, its members bound to her by ties of blood/milk, cannibalism, death and desire. But it is the sexual desires of the lesbian vampire that render her the most abject of all vampire monsters.

WOMAN AS WITCH: *CARRIE*

One of them, the masculine, apparently victorious, confesses through its very relentlessness against the other, the feminine, that it is threatened by an asymmetrical, irrational, wily, uncontrollable power.

Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*

There is one incontestably monstrous role in the horror film that belongs to woman – that of the witch. The witch was not always a figure of monstrosity, as Sharon Russell points out in her excellent discussion of the changing image of the witch in film. Early silent films, such as those of Georges Méliès (*The Witch's Revenge*, *The Witch*) were primarily interested in using this topic in order to exploit the trick properties of the cinema. Several films (such as *Witchcraft through the Ages*) presented a serious exploration of the subject by adopting a documentary form. This approach also influenced Dreyer's *Day of Wrath*. Universal did not deal at all with the witch in its horror films of the 1930s. One of the first films to present a terrifying picture of the witch was a children's film, *The Wizard of Oz* (1939). In the 1940s the subject of 'woman as witch' was made the topic of humour in some Hollywood comedies, such as *I Married a Witch*. Not until 1943, with the appearance of *The Seventh Victim*, did the witch clearly become a figure of terror. By the 1960s the witch had joined the ranks of popular horror film monsters with *Black Sunday* and *Witchcraft*. Emphasis, however, tended to be more on the witch-hunt or the male leader of the coven rather than on the witch as a monster in her own right. This was certainly true of the few Hammer horror films which dealt with this subject. *Burn Witch Burn!*, released in 1962, is probably the first horror film with a witch as the central monster. Barbara Steele, who became known as the 'High Priestess of Horror', played a witch in both *The She-Beast* and *Black Sunday*. Today the witch, as a figure of horror in her own right, has become central to films such as *Seizure*, *Suspiria*, *Inferno*, *Carrie*, *A Stranger in Our House* and *Witches*. In postmodern horror films such as *The Evil Dead* and *Evil Dead II* the abject nature of the witch's appearance (see illustration) has even become a source of grim humour.

Historically and mythologically, the witch has inspired both awe and dread. In ancient societies all magical powers, whether used for good or evil purposes, inspired the deepest dread amongst the members of the community. One of the most interesting aspects of the witch in earlier centuries was her role as healer. Barbara Walker points out (1983, 1076-7) that in many cultures witches had metaphoric names such as 'herberia' (one who gathers herbs), 'pixidria' (keeper of an ointment box), and 'femina saga' (wise-woman). In her role as mother, woman no doubt was the one responsible for developing early forms of herbal medicine. Joseph Campbell (1976) argues that women were the first witches and associated with the powers of magic long before men because of their mysterious ability to create new life. During her periods of pregnancy, woman was seen as the source of a particularly powerful form of magic (Walker, 1983, 315). The earliest known witches were feared not as agents of the devil – as the Christian Church later argued – but because they were thought to possess magical, terrifying powers.

In some cultures, a young girl who had prophetic dreams at the time of her menarche was frequently singled out as a future shaman or witch. Again we see the association between woman's blood and the supernatural. Menstruation was also linked to the witch's curse – a theme explored in *Carrie*. Witches were feared because it was thought they could cast terrible spells and bring death to those they cursed. Historically, the curse of a woman, particularly if she were pregnant or menstruating, was considered far more potent than a man's curse. A 'mother's curse', as it was known, meant certain death. The curse of a woman who also practised as a witch was even more deadly than that of an ordinary woman.

When witchcraft was deemed heresy by the Catholic Church in the fourteenth century, the services witches had previously performed were labelled as crimes – particularly midwifery. The crime that ensured that witches would be burnt at the stake was, as Walker points out, a crime of which they were actually innocent because it was impossible to commit – this was the crime of collaborating literally with the devil (Walker, 1983, 1084). The most common form of collaboration of which they were accused was that of having intercourse with the devil. Detailed information contained in *The Malleus Maleficarum* (1484), an inquisitor's manual for witch prosecution which was commissioned by the Catholic Church and written by two Dominicans, Heinrich Kramer and James Sprenger, makes it clear that a central reason for the persecution of witches was morbid interest in the witch as 'other' and a fear of the witch/woman as an agent of castration.

The Malleus Maleficarum, in use for nearly three centuries, lists in exacting detail the various ways an official could identify a witch. A telling sign was the presence of an extra nipple somewhere on the body, ostensibly used by witches to suckle their familiars or even the devil himself. Consequently, when women were arrested they were stripped, shaved and

searched (often publicly) for this tell-tale nipple. (Some people actually do have a small raised nipple – known medically as a supernumerary nipple – on their bodies. Frequently, it is located near the aureole.) Many of the witches' alleged crimes were of a sexual nature; it is this aspect of witchcraft which is central to *The Exorcist*. Witches were accused, among other things, of copulating with the devil, causing male impotence, causing the penis to disappear and of stealing men's penises – the latter crimes no doubt exemplify male fears of castration.

And what, then, is to be thought of those witches who in this way sometimes collect male organs in great numbers, as many as twenty or thirty members together, and put them in a bird's nest, or shut them up in a box, where they move themselves like living members, and eat oats and corn, as has been seen by many and is a matter of common report?

(*Malleus Maleficarum*, 121)

The Malleus Maleficarum also supplies a series of supposedly logical reasons why women are more inclined to witchcraft than men. The reasons all relate to the classic and phallogocentric definition of woman as the 'other', the weaker but dangerous complement of man. 'What else is woman but a foe to friendship, an unescapable punishment, a necessary evil, a natural temptation, a desirable calamity, a domestic danger, a delectable detriment, an evil of nature, painted with fair colours!' (ibid., 43). The major reason given for woman's 'otherness' is her carnal nature. Women are less intelligent, less spiritual, more like children. 'But the natural reason is that she is more carnal than a man, as is clear from her many carnal abominations' (ibid., 44). *The Malleus Maleficarum* is permeated by an extreme hatred of women and fear of their imaginary powers of castration. It is alarming to note that the Introduction to an edition printed in 1948 by the Reverend Montague Summers praises the two Dominican authors as men of 'extraordinary genius' and the book itself as 'supreme' from the point of view of jurisprudence, history and psychology (Summers, 1948, viii-ix).

No doubt women and men accused of witchcraft eventually confessed to all kinds of absurd and impossible 'crimes' in order to bring an end to their torture. In general, the accused were tortured until they confessed the names of other witches in the community. Burning on a funeral pyre was most likely a blessed relief from the horrors of the medieval torture chamber. The confessions of witches to absurd crimes, such as stealing men's penises and having intercourse with the devil, would have added further to popular mythology about the depraved and monstrous nature of woman's sexual appetites. Witches were also forced to 'confess' the minute details of their sexual acts with the devil, including information about the size of his member, its texture and shape.

THE WITCH IN FILM

I have discussed the history of the witch in some detail because the image of the witch is one which continues to play an important role in the discourses of popular culture – particularly in children's fairy stories and in the horror film. Another discourse which seeks to explore the significance of the witch is that of psychoanalytic theory; here woman as witch is positioned as the oral sadistic mother and the phallic woman (Campbell, 1976, 73). In the horror film, the representation of the witch continues to foreground her essentially sexual nature. She is usually depicted as a monstrous figure with supernatural powers and a desire for evil. Her other social functions as healer and seer have largely been omitted from contemporary portrayals.

The witch is defined as an abject figure in that she is represented within patriarchal discourses as an implacable enemy of the symbolic order. She is thought to be dangerous and wily, capable of drawing on her evil powers to wreak destruction on the community. The witch sets out to unsettle boundaries between the rational and irrational, symbolic and imaginary. Her evil powers are seen as part of her 'feminine' nature; she is closer to nature than man and can control forces in nature such as tempests, hurricanes and storms. In those societies which lack centralized institutions of power, a rigid separation of the sexes is enforced through ritual. In such societies the two sexes are in constant conflict. Women are regarded as 'baleful schemers', the feminine is seen as 'synonymous with a radical evil that is to be suppressed' (Kristeva, 1982, 70). Irrational, scheming, evil – these are the words used to define the witch. The witch is also associated with a range of abject things: filth, decay, spiders, bats, cobwebs, brews, potions and even cannibalism.

In *Black Sunday*, Barbara Steele plays Asa, a witch who swears vengeance on the descendants of the men who executed her hundreds of years ago. She was a Moldavian princess accused by the Inquisition of practising witchcraft and worshipping Satan. The Grand Inquisitor is her own brother who watches while the mask of Satan, lined with sharp spikes, is placed upon her face. She will die when the spikes penetrate her brain. Two centuries later her coffin is discovered and the mask is accidentally removed, revealing her face, which is still miraculously preserved. The dead woman awakens and, although unable to move, is able to orchestrate her bloody revenge from the crypt. Gradually Asa begins to take over the body of her great-granddaughter Katia, who is also played by Barbara Steele. Eventually the witch is caught and consigned to the flames.

Suspiria is set in the Tam Academy of Dance in Germany. Suzie Banyon (Jessica Harper), an American student, investigates the brutal murder of a friend, unaware that the school is run by a coven of witches and that the

basement is the home of an ancient sorceress whose evil powers have contaminated the whole city. In the final sequence Suzie confronts the Queen Witch, Mater Suspiriorum, a grotesque, monstrous, completely hideous figure. She destroys the Queen thereby bringing about the destruction of the school and the coven. No explanation is given for the presence of the witches at the school; they simply exist and their sole purpose appears to be to wreak havoc and destruction in the world. *Suspiria* was the first of a trilogy of horror films planned by Dario Argento called *The Three Mothers*. The second is *Inferno*; the third has not yet been made. In the opening credits to *Inferno* we learn that the world is ruled by Three Mothers: Mater Suspiriorum, Mater Lacrimarum and Mater Tenebrarum who represent sorrow, tears and darkness respectively. They are witches, 'wicked step-mothers, incapable of creating life' – the voice-over at the beginning of *Inferno* tells us. The witch is an abject figure who dwells with abject things: in *Suspiria*, the mother/witches are associated with maggots, in *Inferno* with rats. Each one lives in a house where she hides her 'filthy secrets' in dark secret places which suggest the 'evil womb' of the abject mother (Tansley, 1988, 26). *Suspiria* and *Inferno*, as well as *Black Sunday*, reinforce the stereotypical image of the witch as a malevolent, destructive, monstrous figure whose constant aim is destruction of the symbolic order. Similarly both *The Evil Dead* and *Evil Dead II* reinforce this image of the witch – although with some humour.

In some horror films the witch's supernatural powers are linked to the female reproductive system – particularly menstruation. It is interesting to note that, despite the range of subjects covered in the maternal melodrama and the woman's film, menstruation is not one. It is to the horror film that we must turn for any direct reference to woman's monthly cycle. In *Carrie*, *The Exorcist* and *Omen IV: The Awakening*, the young girls who develop supernatural powers are at the threshold of puberty. In *Carrie* and *The Omen*, the girls' transformation into witch or female devil follows on from the onset of menarche. *Carrie* provides a particularly interesting representation of woman as witch and menstrual monster. Most critical articles on *Carrie* explore the way in which the film presents a critique of the family and of middle American values. In his discussion of the relationship between the horror film and its 'true milieu', the family, Robin Wood places *Carrie* in 'The Terrible Child' category (along with *It's Alive* and *Cathy's Curse*) which has connections with the category of 'Satanism, diabolic possession, the Antichrist' (Wood, 1986, 83). Wood discusses the ways in which the monster's attack is almost always related to sexual and emotional repressions within the familial context: 'The child-monsters are all shown as products of the family, whether the family itself is regarded as guilty (the "psychotic" films) or innocent' (ibid., 84). In his analysis of *Carrie*, David Pirie sees the breakdown in the adult-child relationship as a reflection of a wider collapse in social relationships. He sees the Prom

apocalypse, where Carrie (Sissy Spacek) destroys the entire gathering, as the core of the film:

The apocalypse which follows reunites the two basic strands of American horror which, as I have suggested, seem to deal either in massive, apocalyptic destruction or unnatural family relationships which themselves imply the end of society. In *Carrie*, the breakdown of relationships leads directly and concretely to the destruction of the community.

(Pirie, 1977-8, 24)

The representation of Carrie as witch and menstrual monster has been largely ignored. The only critic who has, to my knowledge, drawn attention to the significance of menstrual blood in *Carrie* and *The Exorcist* is Vivian Sobchack. She points out in a footnote that the bleeding of the two female protagonists, Carrie and Regan, represents 'an apocalyptic feminine explosion of the frustrated desire to speak', a desire denied them within the patriarchal symbolic (Sobchack, 1978, 193). I agree with this comment, but their blood is also used in a wider context, specifically to construct them as figures of abjection. The symbolic function of woman's menstrual blood is of crucial importance in *Carrie*. Blood takes various forms in the film: menstrual blood, pig's blood, birth blood, the blood of sin and the blood of death. It is also blood which flows between mother and daughter and joins them together in their life-and-death struggle. The basic conflict in the film develops from Carrie's attempts to resist her mother's dominating influence. Carrie's mother, Margaret White (Piper Laurie), is a religious bigot who believes that female sexuality is inherently evil and responsible for man's fall from grace. She also believes her daughter is a witch. Not only has she declined to tell Carrie about sexuality and reproduction - in case Carrie is corrupted - she refuses to allow her to develop friendships or a relationship with a boy. Like the monstrous heroine of Brian De Palma's *Sisters*, and Norman from *Psycho*, Carrie is also a divided personality. On the one hand she is a painfully shy, withdrawn, child-like girl who just wants to be 'normal' like every other teenager, while on the other hand she has the power of telekinesis which enables her to transform into an avenging female fury.

The mother-child relationship in *Carrie*, as in *Psycho*, is depicted as abnormal and perverse. Carrie desires independence and yearns to lead her own life, yet she is unable to break away from her mother's dominating influence. Although Carrie is not imbued with her mother's religious mania, she is obedient and follows her mother's orders in matters of religious observance. Even when her mother orders her into a small cupboard under the stairs to pray, Carrie obeys. She vainly tries to reason with her mother over various matters, yet is clearly bound to her by strong emotional ties. Mrs White's feelings for her daughter are more ambiguous;

her desire to control Carrie appears to stem more from a religious than a maternal sense of duty. She wants to save her daughter from the sins of womankind, specifically from the sins of the body. Mrs White is represented as the patriarchal stereotype of the sexually unfulfilled woman. As in *Psycho*, the monstrous child is ultimately depicted as a creation of the psychotic, dominating mother. This relationship constitutes one of the earliest experiences of the abject. Three scenes in *Carrie* interconnect to link her to the world of nature, blood, death and the suffocating mother: the opening shower scene and its aftermath; Prom night; and the scene of Mrs White's bloody crucifixion and Carrie's death. An analysis of each of these will enable us to see how woman's monstrousness is linked to her reproductive function.

What is perhaps most significant about Carrie's telekinetic powers is that she acquires them at the same time as her blood flows, the time of her menarche. Woman's blood is thus linked to the possession of supernatural powers, powers which historically and mythologically have been associated with the representation of woman as witch. When Carrie first bleeds, she is in the shower pleasurably massaging and stroking her body. Like Marion in *Psycho*, Carrie is shown enjoying her own body; the mood is sensual, even erotic. Soft focus, slow motion and dreamy music create a mood of gentle romanticism. Like Marion, Carrie is also cruelly punished for enjoying solitary, sensual pleasures. The romantic mood is suddenly broken as Carrie looks in horror as menstrual blood spills forth and runs freely down her legs. In panic, she runs screaming from the shower. The response of her class is swift and brutal. The girls bombard her with tampons and sanitary napkins as she cowers like a defenceless, terrified child before the savage onslaught. Apart from menstrual blood, Carrie is also associated with another form of abject matter - excrement. Prior to the shower scene, when the girls were playing sport, Carrie made a mistake and one of the girls, Chris, snarled at her, 'You eat shit.'

Carrie is rescued by the sympathetic gym teacher, Miss Collins, and sent home from school where she has to face another ordeal - her mother. Carrie tries to explain to her mother the harm she has caused by keeping her in ignorance but Mrs White refuses to listen. Instead, she raves hysterically about the sins of woman and how she and Carrie must pray for their 'woman-weak, wicked, sinning souls'. She tells Carrie that because Eve was weak and loosed the raven, or the sin of intercourse, on the world, God punished Eve, first with the 'Curse of Blood', second with the 'Curse of Childbearing', and third with the 'Curse of Murder'. Mrs White sees Carrie as one of Eve's daughters. 'And still Eve did not repent, nor all the daughters of Eve, and upon Eve did the crafty serpent found a kingdom of whoredoms and pestilences.' The sins of woman are inherited - a position also argued in *The Brood*. Finally, Mrs White forces her daughter into a small dark cupboard where she is told she must pray to God for

forgiveness. Mouting sexist religious principles, Mrs White blames all forms of human evil on woman. She believes that the curse of humanity is passed through woman's blood, from mother to daughter. Woman is the universal scapegoat, the sacrificial victim. True to the practice of ritual atonement, Carrie is literally set up as a sacrificial victim at the Prom.

Carrie is invited to the Prom by Tommy Ross, who has promised his girlfriend, Sue Snell, he will partner Carrie in order to make up for the cruelty of the girls. Sue does not know that another of the girls, Chris Hargenson, has planned a cruel trick. She has rigged the ballot for Queen of the Prom so that Carrie will win. When she is crowned, a bucket of pig's blood, perched in the rafters above, will fall on Carrie and her escort. The pig's blood is linked to woman's blood. When Chris's boyfriend, Billy Nolan, and his mates break into the piggery at night, they make jokes about women and pigs. One says: 'I went out with a girl once who was a real pig!' The scene of the pig's blood cascading over Carrie's body at the Prom echoes the earlier shower scene where her own blood runs down her body. A further parallel between Carrie and pigs is drawn when Chris tells Carrie that she eats 'shit'; pigs are stigmatized as 'dirty' creatures because of their habit of wallowing in their own excrement (if there is no mud available) to protect their extremely sensitive skins from sunburn.

Women and pigs are also linked in myth and language. In Greek and Latin the female genitals are referred to as 'pig', and the cowrie shell which clearly represents the female genitals was called 'pig'. Even today, 'sowishness' is used in German as a slang term for menstruation (Shuttle and Redgrove, 1978, 37). *The Exorcist* also associates woman with pigs. 'The sow is mine!' Regan screams as she tries to possess her mother sexually. Part of the problem with *Carrie* is that it plays on the debased meaning of woman's/pig's blood in order to horrify modern audiences; in so doing it also perpetuates negative views about women and menstruation. The analogy drawn between women and pigs is also central to the film's discourse on the abject. Carrie/woman is monstrous because she bleeds like 'a stuck pig', as the saying goes. But the meaning of the pig's blood is ambiguous. In their study of carnival culture, Peter Stallybrass and Allon White (1986) draw attention to the fact that the pig symbolized 'low' discourses that related to the grotesque, disgusting body. Insofar as carnival permitted a celebration of the grotesque we can see that the drenching of Carrie's body in pig's blood represents a kind of inversion of a royal coronation. She is crowned Queen and anointed with pig's blood prior to using her demonic powers to wreak devastation on the assembly, and we are encouraged to identify with her as she carries out her terrible revenge.

By associating Carrie's supernatural powers with blood, the film draws on superstitious notions of the terrifying powers of menstrual blood. According to Pliny, 'a monstrous woman's touch could blast the fruits of the field, sour wine, cloud mirrors, rust iron, and blunt the edges of knives'

(Walker, 1983, 643). In *The Malleus Maleficarum* witches were blamed for a range of similar offences, such as turning milk sour, ruining crops and causing storms at sea. From the eighth to the eleventh centuries many churches forbade menstruating women to enter. As late as 1684 women in their 'fluxes' were ordered to remain outside (Morris, 1973, 110). In some religions, such as Judaism, menstruating women are still regarded as unclean and sexual intercourse is forbidden. Witches were also accused of vampirism and of using menstrual blood, particularly that from a girl's first bleeding, to perform magic and concoct poisonous potions. According to Robert Graves, Thessalian witches used a girl's first menstrual blood to make the world's most feared poison – 'moon-dew' (Graves, 1966, 166).

Significantly, Carrie only develops the powers of telekinesis when she first bleeds; the suggestion is that her blood is both powerful and magical. Ultimately, woman's blood is represented in the film as an abject substance and helps to construct Carrie as monstrous. When Carrie unleashes the full force of her powers, she takes on the appearance of an avenging Lamia. Standing above the crowd, her body covered in blood, her eyes bulging with fury, she wreaks destruction, transforming the night 'Among the Stars' into an orgy of death. At one point Carrie uses her powers to animate a fire hose; it writhes amongst the crowd bringing death in its wake and taking on the appearance of a giant serpent, a fitting companion for the Queen of Death. Like the witches of other horror films, Carrie has become a figure of monumental destruction sparing no one in her fury. But because she has been sadistically treated by her fellow classmates and her insane mother, Carrie is also a very sympathetic figure.

Carrie returns home to discover her house illuminated by a host of candles. Her mother is absent. Carrie takes off her bloody gown and huddles in a foetal position in the bath, where she washes away the blood and make-up, both signs of her womanhood. The bath filled with bloody water suggests a rebirth and a desire to return to the comforting dyadic relationship. As in many horror films, the pre-Oedipal mother is represented as a primary source of abjection. Unlike the young girl we first saw enjoying her body in the shower, Carrie is once again reduced to a trembling child as she was when the girls pelted her with tampons.

This movement – from child to woman and woman to child – is crucial to the film's representation of woman as abject. As Carrie attempts to break away from the maternal entity, she takes on the signs of womanhood, particularly in relation to her Prom appearance. Like a fairytale heroine, she is transformed from ugly duckling to beautiful swan. As Carrie moves back into a state of childlike dependency, she sheds these trappings (ball gown, make-up) of burgeoning independence and turns once again to her mother for protection and solace. Carrie's journey back, like her temporary escape, is symbolized by a physical change: the long nightdress and scrubbed face are those of the little girl wanting a mother. All traces of

blood have been removed. As Carrie leaves the bathroom, her mother appears. She is dressed not in her customary black costume but in a white nightgown suggesting purity and innocence. Carrie falls into her arms, crying: 'You were right, Mamma!' But her mother does not understand. In her eyes Carrie has sold herself to the devil. 'Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live,' she screams.

Carrie's abortive attempt to enter the world of male-female relationships seems to awaken Mrs White's memories of her own sexual life. She embraces Carrie and begins to talk about her relationship with Carrie's father and how his sexual advances filled her with disgust. Gradually, however, the tone of her confession changes; and she tells Carrie that she liked her husband's 'filthy touching'. As the mother's tone becomes more and more impassioned, she rises up and stabs Carrie in the back. The satin nightgown takes on a new meaning – it points to the mother's role as ritual executioner – and the candles signify that a sacrificial ceremony is under way. What is most interesting about this sequence is the way in which Carrie's stabbing suggests a sexual assault by the mother. Carrie falls down the stairs and cowers in a corner as her mother dances grotesquely around her, preparing to thrust the knife into Carrie once again. Suddenly, Carrie calls on her powers of telekinesis to send a barrage of knives sailing through the air, pinning her mother to the wall. Mrs White dies in a pose which imitates that of Christ on the cross in the statue she keeps in the prayer cupboard.

There is no doubt that Carrie's knife attack has sexual connotations. As Mrs White dies she utters orgasmic moans, which suggest that her release has been brought about by a symbolic form of phallic penetration by her daughter. This scene suggests that the doomed mother-child dyad is marked by repressed sexual desire – a theme also explored in *Psycho*. Carrie pulls her mother's impaled body from the wall and returns to the womb-like closet in which her mother once entombed her, forcing her to pray to God for forgiveness that she was born female. As in the vampire film, *Carrie*'s thematic movement suggests symbolically a return to the womb; a final statement of complete surrender to the power of the maternal entity. Two scenes point to this return: Carrie's seclusion in the womb-like prayer cupboard and her blood bath in which she huddles in a foetal position as she washes away the pig's blood. The castrating mother takes back the life she once created; Carrie is locked for ever in the maternal embrace as mother and daughter die in the burning house.

The body of each woman is marked by bloody wounds; the wound is a sign of abjection in that it violates the skin which forms a border between the inside and outside of the body. As I discussed in relation to *The Brood*, a bodily wound also suggests the moment of birth in which the infant is torn away from the maternal insides. Wounds signify the abject because they point to woman's reproductive functions and her alliance with the world of

nature. In *Carrie*, woman's blood also signifies maternal blood; the blood that nourishes the embryo and emphasizes woman's procreative function. In the horror genre, however, menstrual blood is constructed as a source of abjection: its powers are so great it can transform woman into any one of a number of fearful creatures: possessed child, killer and vengeful witch. Yet the film presents contradictory messages: on the one hand it redeploys ancient blood taboos and misogynistic myths; on the other, it invites sympathy for Carrie as a victim of these prejudices.

Once again we can see that woman's reproductive functions mark her as monstrous. In the horror films discussed above woman is represented as monstrous in relation to her reproductive and maternal functions. This occurs for a number of reasons: the archaic mother (*Alien*) horrifies because she threatens to cannibalize, to take back, the life forms to which she once gave birth; the possessed girl (*The Exorcist*) evokes a pleasurable disgust because she confronts us with those abject substances (blood, pus, vomit, urine) that signify a return to a state of infantile pre-socialization; the pregnant woman (*The Brood*) horrifies because her body houses an alien being – the infant/other; the female vampire (*The Hunger*) is monstrous because she draws attention to the female blood cycle and she reduces her captives to a state of embryonic dependency in which they must suckle blood in order to live; the young female witch (*Carrie*) evokes both sympathy and horror because her evil deeds are associated with puberty and menarche. The monstrous-feminine is constructed as an abject figure because she threatens the symbolic order. The monstrous-feminine draws attention to the 'frailty of the symbolic order' through her evocation of the natural, animal order and its terrifying associations with the passage all human beings must inevitably take from birth through life to death. In conclusion, I wish to re-emphasize that I regard the association of woman's maternal and reproductive functions with the abject as a construct of patriarchal ideology. (Similarly, it is man's phallic properties that are frequently constructed as a source of monstrosity in films dealing with the male monster.) Woman is not, by her very nature, an abject being. Her representation in popular discourses as monstrous is a function of the ideological project of the horror film – a project designed to perpetuate the belief that woman's monstrous nature is inextricably bound up with her difference as man's sexual other.